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ABSTRACT

Debate as an elitist activity can be defined in two ways: it may mean that entry to a tournament is restricted to only a few participants from any one school, or it may mean that although a wide range of students may participate in debate, only the best debaters are allowed to compete in prestigious national tournaments. The restriction on the number of participants from one school that may attend a tournament may be justified by a number of arguments, including the limited number of students that can be covered by any one judge at a tournament. The practice of sending only the finest debaters to national tournaments may also be justified by several arguments, such as the fact that the "star system" provides an incentive for debaters to work hard to become members of the traveling squad. An appropriate response to these rationalizations is that they have both positive and negative aspects and that the term "elite" may be placed in a broader perspective so that an egalitarian approach may be taken. In implementing that approach, debate coaches must take steps to make debate available to as many students as possible. These steps include hosting and attending tournaments that emphasize sound educational practices and staying actively involved in coaching and tournament judging. (DF)

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Debate as an Elitist Activity

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CS 505 262

Debate as an Elitist Activity

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The selection committee asked me to prepare a paper on the following topic:

> Resolved: Debate should be an elitist activity, reserved for the most intelligent students.

While I agreed to address any issue given to me, I should say at the outset that I personally have some serious reservations concerning the elite nature of debate. What I will attempt to do will be to present information pertinent to the advisability of choosing only the most intelligent students to participate in debate.

To call debate an elitist activity can mean one of two things. First, it could mean that debate should be restricted to only a few participants from any individual school. Second, it could mean that, while participation in debate is open to a wide range of students, a few "star" students are given the opportunity to compete nationally in prestigious tournaments, while the other

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1. Paper prepared for the National Forensic League Conference on the State of Debate, August, 1985. This paper was prepared with the collaboration of my friend Walter Ulrich of Vanderbilt University.

students are sent primarily to local tournaments. Since there are different implications for these two positions, I would like to address these two issues separately.

Arguments for Limiting Participation in Debate

The restriction on the number of participants in any debate program can be justified through a number of arguments. Initially, it can be argued that the limited amount of resources may force a director to maintain a relatively small squads. Unfortunately, debate budgets are not unlimited; there is a finite amount of money available to the director of forensics. There are other constraints placed on a director; only a finite amount of time and energy can be devoted to the activity. The result of these factors is that the director must make choices concerning how to allocate scarce time and money. Sayer notes:

> The star system exists to meet the needs of limited finances. Since funds are few, it is common sense to make the maximum use of available funds for/on the school's best debaters.[2]

This view opposes that of Miller when he addressed the issue of what makes a good debate program. Miller argues:

> If coaches were to spend as much time on coaching the whole squad -- distribute their energy a little -- as

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2. James Edward Sayer, "Developing the Debate Program: A Comparison of Systems." Debate Issues, December, 1981, p. 2.

> they do on coaching the "stars" of the squad, three or four times the number of people currently participating could take part in a forensic program.[3]

To spread these resources out among a large number of students, however, might be counterproductive. Rather than providing a high-quality experience to a few, a director might end up providing a superficial treatment of debate to many. This may result in the brighter students becoming bored (and leaving the activity), while the other students fail to receive the maximum benefit of debate. It might prove desirable to focus on a few students, to ensure that they receive the maximum benefit of debate. To attempt to fully coach all members of a large squad might overload an individual coach and contribute to coach burnout. In addition, as the squad increases in size, the amount of paperwork may increase to the point that the director may spend more and more time on administrating the program and less and less time on coaching and teaching the students.

Even if the squad has a large membership, many individuals could not attend several tournaments. There is a physical limit to the number of students that can be in a car, or the number of students that can be covered by a judge at a tournament. In addition, many large tournaments (such as Emory, Northwestern,

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3. N. Edd Miller, "Competitive Debating Should be De-Emphasized," The Gavel, 36 (May, 1954). Cited in Arthur Kruger, Counterpoint: Debates About Debate (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1968), p. 241.

Glenbrook South) restrict the number of teams that a school may enter, and smaller tournaments might be swamped by a large number of entries from a single school. A number of states and school systems have devised self-imposed rules limiting the number of out-of-state, non-contiguous state, or "within a certain Mileage distances" tournaments that schools under their jurisdiction may attend. With a coach facing this constraint plus those previously mentioned, often difficulties arise in locating enough tournaments that will meet the needs of students in the program.

It might also be argued that all students do not benefit equally from debate. A little knowledge can sometimes be a dangerous thing. Students exposed to just a little debate may not really be benefited from the activity. Those that are ignored in the process might develop negative attitudes toward the activity. Others may be discouraged by the high entry barriers to successful participation in debate. It might be wise to channel these students to other activities where they might have a more profitable educational experience.

It should be noted that all schools do, to one degree or another, restrict participation in debate. Sayer notes:

> . . . the open system does not mandate that literally everybody should take part in the debate program. On the contrary, the debaters must be willing to work - to research,[4] to get together with colleagues, to practice.

The amount of time involved in debate, as well as the money required for materials, workshops, travel, and so on may cause certain individuals to fail to debate. Those who work on weekends or participate in other extracurricular activities are, in many cases, prevented from debating. In addition, we exclude those with low grades (who may be restricted by school policy from participating in some activities). In addition, the energy spent on recruiting may vary depending upon the size of the squad; as the squad increases in size, for example, a coach may spend less time attempting to recruit still more participants. The question becomes, where do we draw the line on participation?

One must choose whether or not to use an "absolute standard" to identify "the most intelligent students," or should one be cast into selecting "the most intelligent students" from those available within the student population of that particular school. Certainly one should carefully consider the implications emanating from these diverse approaches. To deny that there are vast differences in intelligence levels from school to school

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4. Sayer, p. 5

among those currently debating would indeed be quite ludicrous. For example, in schools where standardized test scores are significantly below the national average, and perhaps even below the state average, there is at least some justification to "reserve debate for the most intelligent students." On the other hand, where academic excellence has been the hallmark with a large percentage of the student body eventually being admitted to the most respected colleges and universities in the United States, a much different situation clearly exists. Here one finds that a substantial portion of students capable of pursuing debate with promising results for their debate careers. Students in this kind of environment are often limited by their own lack of motivation in debate because of other academic and non-academic pursuits.

The label of "elitist" is not one that educators should necessarily always view negatively. In a period of time when the secondary education system is coming under attack, it might be desirable to emphasize that debate is a time-tested method of training the future leaders of our country. The evidence is clear that debate is very effective in training individuals how to think, research, and analyze issues. It might not be undesirable to view debate as an activity directed toward the elite student. Just as schools are developing programs geared toward the gifted math or science student, debate could be viewed as a program designed for the gifted student interested in

government, economics, and sociology. Debate can provide an activity of interest for the bright student who might otherwise be bored with school. To make this goal explicit would hardly make debate an undesirable activity; indeed it might increase the prestige of debate at a school, and it might increase the support for debate on campus.

It should also be recognized that limiting debate to a relatively few gifted students does not prevent those excluded from participating in other forensic activities. A small debate team can be supplemented with a large individual events program that provides an outlet for those students not on the debate team. These activities might not only help the student educationally, but they also entail less of a risk of burnout.

Several arguments can be set forth for diversifying the forensics program. First, it may be said that high-powered tournament debate fails to develop audience-oriented public speaking skills. This might be solved by insisting that these same debaters participate regularly in contests in original oratory or extemporaneous speaking; the barrier here is an attitudinal one on the part of the debaters. They regard themselves, for the most part, as "specialists" and do not choose to enter these contests while their primary or sole interest centers on debate. Second, debate itself may not prove attractive to all kinds of students who might benefit from

involvement in other aspects of the forensics program. Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes note:

> . . . it is probably not possible to devise a speech contest activity to teach every imaginable rhetorical goal. It seems reasonable to assume some aspects of communication and persuasion will have to be taught in the classroom alone or through student projects other than those suitable for forensics programs.[5]

Arguments for a "Star" System

Even if a school has a large debate program, the coach may select to spend a disproportionate amount on a relatively small group of individuals. These teams may travel nationally, while the other teams are restricted to a few local tournaments. There are a number of justifications for this position.

First, the star system might increase the educational value of debate. By exposing members of the squad to other areas of the country, debaters are exposed to new cases, arguments, judges, and styles of debate. This can increase the educational benefits of debate. If a group of teams and/or coaches are restricted to one geographical area, their thinking may become stagnant; travel tests these views and introduces these individuals to divergent viewpoints.

It should also be noted that these benefits are not restricted

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5. Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke and Jack Rhodes, Directing Forensics (Denver: Morton Publishing Company, 1978, p. 53.

to the few individuals who travel nationally. When the "star" debaters return home, the new ideas are filtered down to other members of the squad, and the coach might benefit by the exposure to other ideas, improving his or her coaching skills. Nor are the benefits limited to the individual squad that travels widely. As members of the team use new ideas, strategies and arguments that are used in one section of the country are spread to other schools in the locality. Thus, the star system helps spread arguments, cases, and ideas to all parts of the country instead of limiting them to one section of the country.

The star system also provides an incentive for debaters to work hard to become a member of the traveling squad. The system rewards hard working debaters with travel to exotic places.[6] If a school is located in an area with only a few strong teams, wider travel patterns expose a few members of the squad to more rigorous testing of their ideas than in possible from attending weaker tournaments. (And in some cases, weaker schools may prefer a strong squad send its top teams outside the area to give the other schools an opportunity to win local tournaments.)

The star system may also help enhance the prestige of the debate squad, the school, and members of the squad. By traveling widely, students are able to visit college campuses and to talk

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6. See Sayer, p. 2

with college debaters, assisting them in making decisions about potential colleges and establishing contacts for possible scholarships. Competing at such tournaments as Harvard, Northwestern, Emory, and Princeton can add prestige to the squad. Sayer notes:

> Although not accompanied by a marching band and a corps of cheerleaders, nor preceded by lively pep rallies and 'school spirit' displays, interscholastic debate is a competitive endeavor that matches teams from various high schools for the purpose of winning acclaim. As with other competitive activities, the success or lack of success of the debate squad reflects the perceived quality and worth of the high school. To many people, a winning debate team comes from a 'good' high school; a losing team comes from a 'poor' high school. Thus, since the record of the debate squad has an impact upon the school's reputation, it is sensible that only the school's best debaters be allowed to compete interscholastically. Much like a varsity sport, debate is a competitive activity between schools as well as individuals. Therefore, the best individuals should be chosen to represent the school.[7]

Conclusion

Given finite resources available to the director of forensics, as well as the limited amount of time available for coaching, some method of coping with the size of a squad must be developed. This might include methods of restricting participation in debate. This paper has attempted to outline some of the arguments that can be made for such a limitation.

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7. Sayer, p. 3

DEBATE AS AN ELITIST ACTIVITY

A RESPONSE

By Dick Fawcett
National Federation

The selection committee has asked me to respond to Billy Tate's paper, "Debate As an Elitist Activity." Mr. Tate and I have been asked to address the proposition, "Resolved: Debate should be an elitist activity, reserved for the most intelligent students."

Mr. Tate acknowledges at the outset that he has serious reservations concerning the elite nature of debate. I share Mr. Tate's reservations. During the next few minutes I should like to expand upon these reservations and evaluate the arguments proposed by Mr. Tate in defense of the above-named resolution. I should then like to offer arguments favoring an egalitarian approach to debate.

Mr. Tate suggests that when we call debate an elitist activity, it can mean one of two things. First, that debate should be restricted to only a few participants from many individual schools. Second, that participation in debate should be open to a wide range of students, but only a few "star" students should be given the opportunity to compete nationally in prestigious tournaments. Before addressing these two distinctions, I should like to place the term "elite" in a broader perspective.

By definition, "elite" refers to a process wherein a choice part is selected over lesser parts. Dictionaries comment that "a socially superior group" or "a powerful minority group" may be formed through such a process.

Perhaps Mr. Tate's reservations stem from the propensity of some debaters to behave as though they were a socially (or intellectually) superior group -- or even a powerful minority. That some coaches appear to encourage and propagate this attitude and behavior is unfortunate, but not uncommon.

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I would argue that an egalitarian approach to debate is more educationally defensible. Such an approach testifies to our belief in human equality with respect to social, political and economic rights and priviledges. I would argue that debate is an activity which is alredy restricting by its emphasis on research, analysis, oral reasoning and extended time commitments. It is therefore uncessary, if not counterproductive, for coaches to develop elitist philosophies which limit debate to a select few. Our goal should be to make debate available to as many students as possible.

Expanding on the argument set forth by Mr. Tate for diversifying forensics programs, I should like to maintain that we have defined our task as debate coaches too narrowly. Over the past several months while locating free and low-cost materials for the 1985-86 national high school debate topic on water policy, I have had the opportunity to work closely with the American Chemical Society, the National Council for the Social Studies, seventeen government agencies, the League of Women Voters and more than a dozen professional organizations. Individuals in nearly all of these organizations expressed excitement over the potential our water policy topic had for raising the consciousness of high school debaters. They saw high school debate as an ideal medium for focusing on this important area of nationwide concern.

Debate coaches are in a unique position to facilitate interaction among various elements of our school and social/economic communities regarding vital issues. This could take the form of in-service training for social studies teachers who wish to implement the debate process to stimulate discussion among their students. It could mean working with chemistry teachers who wish to expand their technical study of water to include social issues. It could include the appearance of debate-trained students on local and national television shows. It could include the appearance of audience-oriented debaters at meetings of Kiwanis, Rotarians or League of Women Voters.

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It might also include cable television interviewing of local, state or national Congressmen regarding proposed national water legislation.

It is my opinion that our failure to define our task more broadly has brought about the many criticisms currently being leveled at cross-examination debate -- especially at the prestigious, national circuit debaters. By devoting so much of our time and energy to a few students who travel extensively to far-away tournaments, we often have neglected the broader, more educationally justifiable objectives of our programs. When businessmen, lawyers and school administrators shake their heads in disgust after listening to final rounds of debate at "top" competitive tournaments, we should begin examining the effects of our myopic vision. When only the most highly ranked trained judges are allowed to write ballots at prestige touraments, i.e., those considered adequate to judge our students after a tournament strike system, we have moved our process clearly outside the confines of a broadly conceived educational program. We can all name competent individuals, e.g., chairmen of speech departments at major universities, who are no longer considered qualified to judge high school debaters. These "outsiders" have much to tell us, if we would only listen.

It's time for coaches to exert leadership over their debate activity. Too often, coaches complain that forces outside their control are ruining their debate programs. Our major problem today is not with reduced budgets, state association requirements or unresponsive administrators. It is with ourselves; we have lost control of our activity. Our preoccupation with the selection of elite students to represent us at elite tournaments so that we can establish ourselves as elite coaches is, in my opinion, largely responsible for the condition in which we find debate today.

Debate training should be available to every student who wishes to learn research skills and the process of dialect. The stimulation of competition

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should be available to all students who are willing to pay the price. As Mr. Tate has observed, a natural selection process already takes place when students discover the commitment of time and energy necessary to succeed in debate.

Students will make this selection themselves. Our role as educators (and we are educators even before we are debate coaches) should be to create opportunities for additional learning, not to discourage growth and initiative among students. Merely selecting "the most intelligent students" is marginally defensible, educationally.

Mr. Tate argues that educators should not always view elitism negatively. At a time when the secondary educational system is coming under attack, Mr. Tate points out, we need to emphasize debate as a training method for future leaders. That gifted students should choose debate to expand their thinking, research and analysis skills is commendable.

Before we relegate less gifted students to an individual events program, as Mr. Tate recommends, we should examine carefully the philosophical bases for our school's debate program. If training future leaders is an avowed goal, we cannot afford to dismiss less-gifted students who may develop into future leaders despite our a priori selection process. If our students are burning out, perhaps we should reexamine the length of our seasons and the commitment demanded of tournament debate teams. It is conceivable that we might curtail our tournament season to avoid burnout. Our debaters might then be free to pursue other interests within the school activities program.

If high-powered debate fails to develop audience-oriented public speaking skills, perhaps we ought to examine ways to overcome this problem rather than wait for individual event participation to undo whatever harm has been done to our students by tournament debate.

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Coaches and judges have it in their power to refocus tournament debate on communciation. If debaters are not rewarded for speed and spread delivery, they soon learn to synthesize arguments, slow their rate of delivery, and address major points of clash in rebuttals. If debate does not appear attractive to many students (and adults), let's not excuse that in the name of elitism. Rather, let us work at making the activity more attractive -- for the right reasons.

Mr. Tate would have us accept the "star" system as a justifiable rationale for elitist programs. Arguing that the star system might increase the educational value of debate by exposing a few students to new cases, arguments, judges and styles of debate, he claims a trickle-down advantage for the stay-at-home, not-so-elite debaters.

It has been argued that many of our problems with cross-examination debate are due to exposure to non-topical new cases, obtuse arguments, college student judges and the speed/spread delivery sytles prevalent at prestige tournaments. Such travel may be counterproductive, educationally, for the two elite debaters and their coaches. What trickles down to the debaters who failed to debate that weekend may only be jargon, increased delivery speed, and non-topical case ideas.

Mr. Tate's claim that the star system enhances a school's prestige -- and establishes possible contacts for college scholarships -- is not without merit. Once again, however, it focuses on the few debaters who lay claim to a disproportionate share of a coach's time and a program's budget. If these are incidental benefits to an educationally sound program, well and good. If they are used to justify the exclusion of students who seek a debate experience, the trade-off is unacceptable.

Our preoccupation with prestige for debaters (and coaches) may lie at the heart of our problem. It may blind us to our own excesses and abuses.

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It may prevent us from acting out our real values. By heightening a distorted sense of self-worth, it may corrupt our perspective as educators. Living in such an artificial world is bad for debaters, for coaches, and for human beings.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest specific actions which each of us might take to refocus tournament debate along egalitarian lines.

1. We can develop a philosophy for our programs which has the purpose of inviting rather than screening out students who wish to practice dialectic.
2. We can communicate to our debaters that they have worth as human beings, i.e., thay have more than instrumental value to us.
3. We can coach our students to use debate practices that lie clearly within our personal set of values.
4. We can reward behavior in debate rounds that reflects our values as educators and as students of rhetoric.
5. We can expose our students to wider ranges of audiences, e.g., use lay judges in our tournaments, debate before community and school groups.
6. We can design our programs and competitive activities so that they truly facilitate participation and learning.
7. We can host and attend tournaments which emphasize sound educational practices and provide extended participation for all participants.
8. We can design reward systems which recognize the contributions of individuals who may not have a winning season, but are mastering the debate process.
9. We can educate the parents of our debaters to understand the larger, educational values of a debate experience.
10. As head coaches, we can stay actively involved in coaching and tournament judging. We can avoid turning our programs over to assistants who lack educational perspective or mature judgment.